

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE USE OF SHORT STORY AT TERTIARY LEVEL IN ESL CLASSROOM: LEARNERS' INTERESTS AND PERCEPTIONS

Arifeen Muhammad Shajedul¹ and Zakaria AKM²¹Asst. Prof., Dept. Languages, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Mymensingh²Asst. Prof., Dept. Humanities and Social Science, Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology, Gazipur
msa_bau@hotmail.com ; kmzakaria2002@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

There has been an increasing awareness of the significance of integrating literature in ESL syllabus. Depending on students' language requirements a selection of short stories was attempted into the English language classes with a view to developing learners' English language skills in terms of grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing. There were thirty adult university students receiving an English language program. A three-stage lesson plan (pre-reading, while reading, and after reading) guided the use of each story. Further, to obtain students' opinion regarding the use of story, each student was asked to keep a separate notebook to find their views following the study of each short story, and a portfolio where they could keep their writings. The data collected through the notebooks and student writings were complemented by administering story perception questionnaire at the end of semester. It has been explored that short stories had an effective and meaningful contribution to students' grammatical and vocabulary knowledge. It also revealed that use of short stories helped students to speak confidently, be more creative and imaginative in their writing.

Keywords: Literature, short story, vocabulary and grammar, speaking skills, writing skills

INTRODUCTION

Literature was initially read and valued only by enthusiasts or elites who excel in the areas of art and language studies has gradually paved its way to become a more dynamic resource in areas such as second or foreign language teaching and learning.

In the case of second or foreign language teaching and learning, for example, literature has been widely accepted as a motivating material, an access to other cultural background, a resource for language acquisition and a medium to expand learners' language awareness. At the same time, literature has also gained reputation to have a wider educational function that may trigger critical abilities and increase emotional awareness that would assist in educating the person as a whole (Lazar, 1999).

Hines (2005) states that it is better to use literature rather than a communicative textbook as it can change the learning approach from focusing on grammar to creative thinking. He believes that literature-based programs focus on the interpretation of the language and this allows students to experiment with the language. It can be assumed that literature allows the students to be creative in their thinking and also gives the students a platform to use the language. In addition, Talif (1995) stated that "...language is inseparable from literature and vice versa." We cannot run away from learning the language when literary text is used. Students learn the language unconsciously when they read literary text. Talif (1995) also believes that "language is the material of literature as stone or bronze is of sculpture, paints of pictures, or sounds of music". To make a literary piece, the writer will need to use the language. Literature cannot be made by itself; there is the material known as language that makes it known as literature. The relationship between literature and language learning, it is evident that there has been significant transformation in the association of these two

distinct areas (Durant, 1993; Delanoy, 1997; Edmondson, 1997).

At the beginning, under the influence of the Formalists and Structuralists, much attention was given to the use of literature in teaching a language. In fact, in the case of the teaching of the English language, English literature was viewed as synonymous with the teaching of the English language (Thakur, 2003). Literature was taught as a body of knowledge or a subject matter that dominated the language syllabus and not as an integral or an embedded component of language learning (Delanoy, 1997; Carroli, 2002).

Since 1980s, the integration of literary works in English as a Foreign Language/English as a Second Language (EFL/ ESL) classes has attracted the interest of an increasing number of researchers due to several benefits offered by the use of literature (Collie & Slater, 1991; Lazar, 1996; Maley, 2001). Instructors have realized that literature can be used to reinforce the skills and complement language teaching. Scher (1976) affirmed that with students at the beginning and intermediate levels, instructors can use literary texts for "language practice, reading comprehension, and possible aesthetic appreciation" (Muyskens, 1983). This is due to the fact that literature is treated as a source of high moral value and a model of excellent language usage that emphasizes on the study of the literary canon in the target language. Since, literary texts can stimulate language acquisition process by providing authentic contexts. The language in literary events creates a context of situation enabling it to transcend the artificial classroom situation (Littlewood, 2000). Hence, literary texts provide the students with real world experiences, relationships between people and society where the target language (L2) is spoken.

In addition, using literature in language classes provides cultural information about the L2. Literary texts increase foreign language learners' insight into the culture of the

country and the people (Collie & Slater, 1991); hence, fostering learners' ability to interpret discourse in different cultural contexts (Savvidou, 2004). Widdowson (1983) stated that literature should be viewed as discourse, which indicates that the student's aim should be to learn how the language system, the structures and the vocabulary used in communication.

Literature can also help students master the vocabulary and grammar of the language and promotes the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Povey, 1967; Stern, 1987). This article illustrates incorporating short stories, as a literature genre, into an English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum of adult learners receiving an intensive English language program. Henceforth, the present study tries to investigate: a) the students' perceptions of the use of short story in terms of its contribution to: i) their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, ii) their speaking and creative writing skills; and b) students' perceptions regarding the contribution of short story to teaching and learning atmosphere of the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, short stories are integrated into the English syllabus with mastery of the language (vocabulary and grammar) with further development of speaking and writing skills with a special focus on student-centered learning, which requires students' active involvement in the learning process on the basis of given tasks. In other words, literature has been incorporated into the ELT syllabus as an aid to studying English language. Patton (1990) suggests that one way in which the study design can be enhanced is to diversify the data collection techniques. Hence, in the present study, a variety of data collection tools were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data in order to address the research questions.

This article illustrates incorporating short stories into English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabus of adult learners receiving an intensive English language preparatory program. First, the article deals with the use of short stories in ESL classes. Then, it illustrates the Lesson plan guiding the incorporation of short stories into the ESL Syllabus. This section also describes criteria for the selection of short stories and the research tools used to collect data. Finally, the contributions of short stories to reinforce students' knowledge of language and to promote their speaking and creative writing skills, as well as its enjoyment value are discussed on the basis of the research findings.

The first data collection tool was to collect student writings which were produced by the students after studying each story.

In order to obtain students' opinion concerning the use of story, each student was asked to keep a notebook to help them keep track of their progress as to what they had learned and how they benefited from the stories, following the study of each literary text, and a portfolio where they could keep their writings.

To enhance the data collected from student writings and notebooks, a 'story perception questionnaire' comprised five sections was developed compatible with the purpose of the study. The questionnaire aimed to determine students' opinion on the degree to which the use of stories has been effective in various aspects in learning English. Students were asked to indicate their answers on a four-point Likert scale, on which value 1 represented 'rarely', and value 4 'always'. The questionnaire also included an open-ended question, where respondents were invited to express any other idea related to this issue. The questionnaire was administered at the end-of-the semester to have summative evaluation with regard to the use of stories in English lessons.

Descriptive statistics was employed in the analysis of the data derived from the questionnaire to obtain frequencies and percentages. Content analysis was applied to the data obtained from the open-ended section of the questionnaire and the students' notebooks. Students' writings were analyzed with a focus on creativity.

The study was conducted with 60 university students with an average of 22 year-old whose level of proficiency is intermediate level. The students were receiving an English language program as a compulsory subject at their undergraduate level offered by the Department of Languages of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), Mymensingh, and it lasted over one semester.

Integrating short stories into the ELT Syllabus

As the objective of the study was incorporation of stories within the syllabus of the English language curriculum while following the regular syllabus, special attention was paid to the selection of short stories so that each story would consolidate language items specified by the syllabus in a meaningful way.

Selection of stories

In using short stories in ESL classes, story selection plays an important role. Loukia (2006) recommends choosing stories with appropriate language level (vocabulary, structures), content (interesting, fun, motivating, memorable, encourages participation), motivation (develop imagination, arouse curiosity, draw on personal experience), and one that has language learning in terms of potential for skills development, language practice, recycling, and learning the target and other cultures. Regarding the length, attention was paid to selecting a complete text but not excessive in length. Considering the afore-presented criteria, in the present study, eight short stories were selected from various sources taking into account length of the story, linguistic density, students' interest, needs, and cultural significance of the subject matter. Each story had a different aim to accomplish within the parallel syllabus depending on its content, language features, speaking, and writing tasks to be performed. Since the literature was intended to reinforce the language items, both grammar and vocabulary, each literary text was chosen with specific learning points in mind, and matched the instructional objectives in the on-going syllabus to enable students to reinforce the language. An average of three lecture sessions of two hours per week was devoted

to practicing this literary genre. The procedures for introducing stories: Pre-reading, while reading and post reading

Teaching Procedure

Pre-reading

The aim of this stage is to introduce the story and motivate the students in order to make the literary text comprehensible through various pre-reading tasks. Students were assisted to activate their schema, and relate the story to their own experience by various techniques, such as brainstorming events, characters, feelings, etc., and predicting the content of the story from the title. The creation of "mental set" at this stage facilitates access to the literary genre to be studied (Maley & Duff, 1987).

While reading

At this stage, students' attention is directed to a study of the theme and the language of the literary genre through various student-centered activities (Collie & Slater, 1991) in order to make the students appreciate the meaning of the story. In analyzing the stories, the kind of technique utilized depended on the characteristics of each text. Each story was exploited in a more communicative or student-centered manner, and students were encouraged to 'participate in the creation of meaning' (Tannen, 1989).

Post reading

This stage comprises speaking and writing tasks. Students were provided with a focused purpose to help them imagine that they will, later, produce oral presentation or a writing task relevant to the theme of the story. Therefore, each story was extended with some follow-up tasks to consolidate the students' language knowledge, improve their speaking and creative writing skills, and to enable the students to connect the story with their own lives,

practicing grammar and vocabulary needed. Speaking and writing tasks revolved around the central theme of the story, ranging from character description, relationships, identity, conflict, which are of most concern to adult students, all of which were among the objectives of the ELT syllabus. The following section illustrates findings from the study.

FINDINGS

Role of short stories in improving language skills and Interest toward the lesson

It has been investigated the role of short stories in improving students' language skills such as vocabulary, grammar, speaking, and writing. Table 1 indicates the breakdown of the manner in which students view the role of short stories in improving their language skills.

Table 1. Role of short stories in improving language skills and Interest toward the lesson

Language skills	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary	87
Grammar	70
Speaking	70
Writing	65

The findings presented in the Table 1 suggests that students' perceive vocabulary as the most improved language skill with 87% of them indicating its benefit towards improving their vocabulary follows grammar 70%, speaking with 70% , and writing with 65%. It has been felt that the new vocabulary students attain from short stories is pertinent as it will assist them further in their comprehension of the text.

Table 2. Role of short stories toward interest in the classroom

Statement	Always	Often	Sometimes
It increased my interest and motivation toward the lessons.	76%	16%	8%
Liked short stories and activities on stories given in the classroom	77%	18%	5%

Table 3. Students' perceptions of the contribution of short story study

A	The contributions of short story to grammar knowledge	Always %	Often %	Sometimes %	Rarely %
1	i) I got to know different language structures.	16.66	76.66	6.66	
	ii) Use of grammar in a more enjoyable and meaningful way.	56.66	43.33		
B	The contributions of short story to vocabulary knowledge				
2	i) I learnt new words differed from those met in the course books.	40.00	60.00		
	ii) Retained the new words easily since I used them in a meaningful context.	50.00	43.33	6.66	
C	The contributions of short story to speaking skill				
3	i) It enabled me confident in speaking.	40.00	56.67	3.33	
	ii) Removed shyness and made me aware of the use oral language.	56.66	30.00	13.33	
D	The contributions of short story to writing skill				
4	i) It enabled me to be more creative.	30.00	70.00		
	ii) Made me aware of the use of English language to express my feelings more easily.	6.66	93.33		
E	The contributions of short story to teaching and the learning atmosphere of the classroom				
5	i) I enjoyed the lesson more.	13.33	86.66		
	ii) It enabled me to study in an enjoyable and comfortable setting.	30.00	70.00		
	iii) It increased my interest and motivation toward the lessons.	16.66	76.66	6.66	

Stories increased the students' interest and motivation toward the lessons (76% always, 16% often and 8% sometimes). In a separate question on students' interest seventy seven percent of the respondents liked short stories and its activities. The statement described the respondents' interest in short stories and that they extend their reading after class hours. Based on the students' response, it showed that the students' level of interest towards short stories is high.

As seen in Table 3, through the questionnaire, the respondents reported that the stories helped them realize the particular use of language (16.66% always and 76.66% often). According to all the students (56.66% always and 43.34% often), short stories helped them to reinforce the grammar that they learnt in the lessons much better. As perceived by all the students (20% always and 70% often), short stories helped them become familiar with different language structures. Students (30% always and 70% often) also agreed that they used grammar in a more meaningful way, through the use of stories.

As far as the students' perceptions of contribution of short story to vocabulary development was concerned, the students unanimously agreed that stories helped them to reinforce the words that they encountered in the course books (40% always and 60% often) and that they also learnt words that differed from those they met in the course books (50% always, 43.33% often and 6.66% sometimes). The students also reported that they could retain the new words easily as a result of studying stories in English lessons.

For speaking, short stories were a great source of inspiration for students to gain confidence as well as removing their shyness (40% always, 56.67% often and 3.33 sometimes). In addition, it is also reported that short stories made them aware of using the language orally (56.66% always, 30% often and sometimes) and helped them expressing their feelings more easily.

Notebook analysis confirmed the findings obtained from the questionnaire. Content analysis of student notebooks revealed that the use of short stories acted as a useful vehicle to practice specific language, both grammar and vocabulary, effectively and meaningfully. Below are students' notebook excerpts: (slightly edited for grammatical correctness)

- I've come across many words that I had learned in my English course book. This helped me to remember the new words better. I have also learned many new words that I had not seen before. By reading short stories I have also increased my vocabulary knowledge.
- I've practiced grammar better for example, adverbs, adjectives and tenses and I have also learned how to use the grammar correctly.
- I have learned how to use the words in appropriate places
- I have found an opportunity to learn more words. This way my vocabulary knowledge expanded

The students also stated that stories enabled them to be more creative (30% always and 70% often), the use of stories enabled them to be more aware of the use of English language (6.66% always and 93.33% often), and that they could express their feelings more easily by means of short stories.

By analyzing students' notebooks and writings on stories, it was found that stories provided a useful and motivating source of input for the kind of writing students were assigned to produce. It also provided a stimulus to the imagination and a convenient initial frame of reference.

Pre-reading: The following questions were asked:

- Do you remember the first time you slept alone? Do or did you have any horrifying dream? How/ what do you feel about it?
- Did you try to do something heroic in your dream? When and what did you do? With reference to the title, make prediction about the content of the story.
- Did you report it to your friends/ parents?
- What do you think a person who has done a heroic job in his dream?

While Reading: Students are encouraged to guess the meaning of the vocabulary using contextual cues in the story. Students were invited to find in the stories examples of expressions that demonstrated character's feelings, and thoughts of tolerance to be used for subsequent writing. They were required to speculate what their own emotions would be if they were in situations experienced by the main character in the story through such questions:

- What would you do if you were in the situation of the grandmother?
- How would you feel and why?

The objective of addressing such questions was to direct students attention to the theme of the story, not to test their memory (Leki, 1986).

After reading: What moral/lesson can you draw out of this story? What insights have you gained? During the course of this study, each student responded to the story and completed a variety of tasks, which provided a rich bank of activities in a meaningful context

This is supported by the notebook entry of several students, as illustrated below:

- I have learned many useful things. I have personally found the lessons when we produced writings as a follow-up to studying stories very productive. I mean it was like learning through games. Also such writings helped us to bring out our inner feelings and emotions.
- Since I started writing stories, I believe that I've made great progress in my writing. I have also felt more confident and become more creative than before.

The contribution of short story to teaching and learning atmosphere of the classroom

The students' opinion about the possible contribution of short story study to teaching and learning atmosphere of the classroom was also highly positive. As demonstrated in Table 3, through the integration of short stories into

English lessons, the students reported that they enjoyed the lesson more (13.33% always and 86.66% often); stories enabled them to study in an enjoyable and comfortable setting (30% always and 70% often) and stories increased the students' interest and motivation toward the lessons (16.66% always, 76.66% often and 6.66% sometimes). Notebook analysis confirmed findings from the questionnaire. One major theme that emerged from the student notebooks was that stories were very beneficial in offering the students a relief from the routine procedures in the classroom as reflected in the following entries from notebook:

- We not only learned a lot but also got entertained while studying short stories and writing about them.
- In each story we learned very useful things, and we got a lot of new ideas.

DISCUSSION

The first outcome of the study was to make grammar practice and vocabulary learning more meaningful. Reading a story offered a wonderful opportunity for the students to see the past tense in action, to observe modal examples of the use of past progressive or modal auxiliaries based on authentic texts. Unlike mechanical grammar activities extensively practiced by language teachers, e.g., fill-in the blank, stories produced by learners demonstrated how the efficient exploitation of this literary genre, by engaging learners in meaningful and enjoyable classroom activities, can maximize learner involvement and creativity. The students all agreed that stories played a positive role in practicing effectively and meaningfully what they had learned about L2. The use of stories in English classes also led to a growth in the students' repertoire of lexical knowledge. The findings suggest that stories help students add to or improve what they have learned in language classes about English, such as grammar and vocabulary. According to the findings, it can be concluded that Story had positive effects on the improvement of students' speaking skills. Students are motivated, engaged and interested in stories and re telling stories, relating them to their personal lives. It is found that story has captured the imagination of both students and teachers. In this research, encouraging students to learn was defined as persuading students to participate in the activities, by making activities interesting for them, making them believe that they will be able to improve their speaking through Short story.

With regard to writing, writing is considered as a neglected skill and one of the difficulties experienced by ESL teachers. It is also generally claimed that students find writing boring and uninteresting. The present study has clearly revealed that this problem can be solved by using short stories which provide a rich source of input by giving students' opportunities and a "reason to communicate in a meaningful context" (Maley & Duff, 1987). In addition, stories provided a purpose for writing. When writing was practiced as a follow up to reading a story, students were able to reflect on their inner thoughts and feelings in different forms such as summarizing the story, adding more familiar variations from their background experiences.

These activities provided a starting point for their writing and each story centered on the structure analyzed in the story (Carter, 1982).

Furthermore, students were exposed to a range of ideas, characters, and the subject matter; each new story provided them with a foreign territory. It has been found that provided that they are guided well, each student can enter the imaginary world of a story and associate himself/herself with the characters. Story-based classroom activities were found to be highly motivating for the students in terms of eliciting strong emotional reactions from learners. Unraveling the plot of a story, writing a letter to a character, summarizing a story is more than a mechanical activity. It demanded a personal response from the students encouraging them to draw on their own experiences. By so doing, the students have become personally and emotionally more invested in the process of language learning.

Short stories also had a potential for enjoyment. Most students enjoyed working with stories. The use of short stories brought variety and innovation to traditional course bound EFL teaching. What is more, efficient exploitation of stories in connection with language learning objectives has provided adult learners of English with more challenging language education than the restricted provision of language training.

Recommendation

In light of the findings from the present study, some pedagogical suggestions are proposed for the integration of this particular literary genre in ESL settings:

- Encourage students to make any guesses the title suggests to activate their schemata,
- Ask the students to relate story to their own similar experiences,
- While reading the story, ask students specific questions to direct their attention to the text (Leki, 1986), to help them predict the next part to sustain their interest, i.e., what do you think will happen next and why?
- Encourage the students to use guessing strategies based on grammatical functions, word formation rules, and using context clues in coping with the meaning of unknown words, etc.
- Help students imagine feelings of the characters, the setting, etc., to form a mental picture,
- After reading or as a follow-up, devise writing tasks according to the theme of the story, such as narrating the story from a different character's point of view or telling the same story with different endings, in a different setting, and so on.

CONCLUSION

Short stories are highly beneficial to use in ESL teaching programs; however, the selection of short stories should be done with reference to the course objective, the learners' profile and the story content in order to make the best of it owing to the unique nature of every teaching situation. In this study, short stories were included in order to reinforce

students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, to promote their speaking and creative writing skills, and to bring enjoyment into the classroom atmosphere. King (2001) puts forth the idea that "pleasure and learning go hand in hand, but pleasure leads the way". Consequently, one can say that integrating short stories will help ESL students to become well rounded professionals since short stories teach more than the skills necessary for survival in the target language.

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